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ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes 5 years of research examining three Minnesota school choice options for students with disabilities: (1) open enrollment; (2) High School Graduation Incentives (a second chance option for at-risk students); and (3) Postsecondary Enrollment Options Program (which allows 11th and 12th graders to enroll in college courses for high school and college credit at no cost). Analysis of the three options addresses program characteristics, participation rates of students with disabilities, impact of transfer as a function of disability classification, student characteristics and reasons for transfer, impact on school districts of transfer of students with disabilities, and program impact. Students with disabilities are participating in each of these options. Questions are raised on the impact of such options on schools, such as how such programs should be evaluated and locus of responsibility for support services. (Contains 22 references.) (DB)

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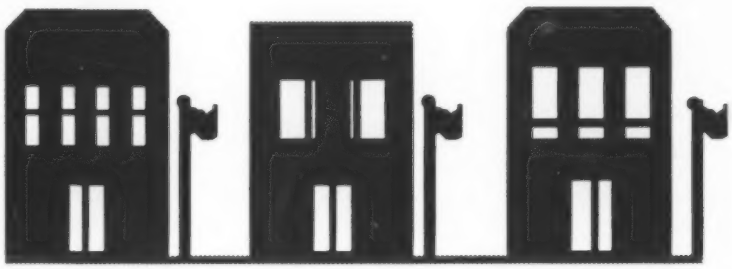
# School Choice and Students with Disabilities: The Practice and the Policy

## Research Report No. 17



Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities

**Cheryl M. Lange**

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Research Report No. 17

# School Choice and Students with Disabilities: The Practice and the Policy

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September, 1995

Abstract

School choice is a policy that elicits considerable debate. Yet, often missing from the discussion is the impact school choice policies have on students with disabilities. In this paper, a synthesis of five years of research examining three Minnesota school choice options is presented. The impact of open enrollment, High School Graduation Incentives (a second chance option for at-risk students), and Postsecondary Enrollment Options on students with disabilities is presented along with the implications of this policy for students and their programs.

Students with disabilities are participating in these options. Each option is individual and meets specific needs of this student population. The role these options play in the education of students with disabilities is explored.

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**School Choice and Students with Disabilities:**

**The Practice and the Policy**

Many policies have been passed or proposed since *A Nation at Risk's* (National Governor's Association, 1983) alarming critique of the American educational system. These policies have been evaluated and reviewed as school districts and state departments of education have implemented many of the reforms. One policy that has been at the center of considerable debate is school choice. For nearly ten years school choice has been a policy whose merits and limitations have been debated across the nation. Proponents of school choice policies contend giving parents and students the right to choose their school will result in moving the educational system to excellence (Finn, 1990; Nathan, 1989; Raywid, 1989; Cookson, 1994). Opponents argue that school choice policies will be detrimental for students, further stratifying students and families by income and ability (Fowler-Finn, 1994; Hayes, 1992; Kozol, 1992; Marcoulides & Heck, 1990).

Though there is considerable discussion about how school choice policies will impact schools and student achievement, there are little data to support or refute its effectiveness as a policy. There are even less data documenting how school choice will impact students with disabilities and the schools that serve them. Yet, with over five million American students identified as having disabilities the impact of school choice policy on these students and their programs is important to consider. Do students with disabilities participate in school choice options? Are they discriminated against when communities offer schools of choice? Why do students with disabilities opt out of their resident schools? To what extent is their special education status a factor in their transfer to a school choice program? Do certain school choice options impact students with disabilities more than others? How are school districts impacted when students with disabilities transfer through a school choice option?

These and other questions are important to address as more and more states contemplate school choice. Unlike many other reforms, school choice has exhibited staying power. Its

popularity as an educational reform measure is considerable at all levels of government. Over the past decade, school choice policies have been passed or proposed in over half of the fifty states (Cookson, 1994; Ysseldyke, Lange, & Delaney; 1992). There are many different types of school choice options being proposed and implemented. These options include open enrollment (interdistrict choice), intradistrict choice, magnet schools, charter schools, postsecondary enrollment options, second chance programs for at-risk youth, and vouchers. While each of these options has a different focus, they all allow parents an active role in deciding where their children should attend school.

Data are now available that allow us to reflect on the role school choice plays in the education of students with disabilities. Over the past five years researchers at the University of Minnesota's *Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities Project* have studied the impact of Minnesota's school choice options on students with disabilities. Minnesota has some of the most comprehensive school choice legislation in the country and provides a useful laboratory for evaluating school choice and its impact on students with disabilities and school districts that serve them.

Three of the most popular school choice options were investigated in Minnesota: Open Enrollment, High School Graduation Incentives (second chance program for at-risk youth), and Postsecondary Enrollment Options. The following synthesis of the research findings provides a useful lens by which to evaluate the impact of these policies on students with disabilities and to review the implications for other states as they contemplate or implement school choice options.

## Synthesis of Findings

### Open Enrollment

Open enrollment is considered one of the most comprehensive public school choice options available to students in Minnesota. Students may transfer to any school district with few restrictions. The only reasons for denial of transfer is lack of space or the transfer resulting in noncompliance with desegregation rules. Minnesota's law specifically states that school districts

may not deny transfer to students because of a disability. The number of students transferring through open enrollment has increased considerably since the option became mandatory for all school districts in the 1990-1991 school year. In that year approximately 6,000 students transferred through open enrollment. During the 1993-1994 school year the number increased to over 15,000.

Several studies were conducted over the past five years to determine how open enrollment is impacting students with disabilities and school districts. Combined, these data provide a comprehensive picture of Minnesota's open enrollment option and its impact on students with disabilities. The findings discussed in this paper are from the following sources:

- Minnesota Department of Education: Participation rates of students with and without disabilities.
- Parent Survey: Survey sent to all parents who reported their child had a special need on the open enrollment transfer application for the 1990-1901 school year (n=251; 72% return rate).
- Parent Interview (n=18)
- Director of Special Education Survey: Survey sent to the directors of special education in Minnesota during the 1990-1991 school year (n=62; 59% return rate).
- Multiple Case Studies: Results from in-depth case studies of eight Minnesota school districts. Four districts had a net gain of students with disabilities and four had a net loss. All districts experienced a higher than average transfer of students with disabilities in or out of their districts. Data collection occurred during the 1992-1993 school year.

Participation. During the 1990-1991 school year the proportion of students with disabilities transferring through open enrollment was approximately 5% (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Gorney; 1994). The proportion of students with disabilities transferring through open enrollment has increased to over 8% of option participants (1993-1994). Approximately 10% of Minnesota's K-12 student population are identified as having a disability.

The participation rates of students with disabilities was proportional to the general school population in several areas. Participation occurred across disability types mirroring the

proportion of disabilities in the various categories in Minnesota. Though many argue that families accessing a school choice option such as open enrollment will be more educated and affluent, the findings from a 1990-1991 survey of parents of students with disabilities who transferred indicated that the participants' education and income levels were proportional to the state's general population. Approximately half of the students with disabilities transferring were from rural areas and half from the metropolitan areas. This is also similar to the general student population.

Reasons for Transfer. A survey of parents whose students transferred during the 1990-1991 school year revealed that parents transfer their children for reasons related to special education. The five most frequently reported reasons were:

- My child's special education needs are better met at the chosen school.
- Teachers at the chosen school can give my child more personal attention.
- We were unhappy with our former school district.
- Our child's friends, brother, or sisters attend(ed) the new school.
- Special education teachers at the chosen school keep me more informed of my child's progress.

When responses were analyzed by grade level, reasons relating to a fresh start and dropout prevention were more frequently reported by parents of secondary students with reasons relating to daycare issues and utility more frequently reported by parents of elementary school children.

Most parents responding to the survey also added comments about their experiences with open enrollment (Ysseldyke, Lange, Delaney, and Lau; 1993). Parents were quite passionate about their feelings about school choice. Most comments centered on the positive changes in their child's behavior that they attributed to the change of school. In addition, issues relating to teacher effectiveness and its impact on their child were the comments most frequently mentioned.

While this information provided an interesting focal point for discussion of students with disabilities and transfer through school choice, more information was needed to understand what parents meant by these reasons and comments. To further delineate parents' reasons for transfer and their relationship to special education, eighteen survey respondents were interviewed. These parents were asked to describe the needs and expectations they had for their children and their children's school. These needs were categorized according to an outcomes model developed by the *National Center on Educational Outcomes* (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, & Gilman; 1993) that included domains relating to presence and participation, adaptation and accommodation, physical health, personal and social adjustment, responsibility and independence, academic and functional literacy, contribution and citizenship, and satisfaction.

Parents were articulate in describing their child's needs and their expectations of schools and teachers. Most parents reported their child's needs fell into categories of adaptation and accommodation (services to support their learning and development) and social and personal adjustment (Lange, Ysseldyke, Lau, & Lehr; 1995). Parents reported that they expected the schools to provide the necessary support services in the academic areas to meet the needs of their children. They also reported their child's need for a supportive environment that would allow the child to thrive and realize his or her potential.

Parents also had expectations for the school that were related to their reasons for transfer. The expectations most often articulated by parents fell into the domains of responsibility and independence, academic and functional literacy, and the emerging domain entitled supportive environment. Parents expected the school to help their children reach their potential in the academic and functional areas within a supportive environment. In addition, they expected the school personnel to help their child become responsible and independent.

The results from the in-depth interviews verified findings from the parent survey. The reasons parents were transferring their children were often related to special education and how schools were providing the services. Findings also highlighted the important role the teacher plays in the transfer decision. Parents discussed the importance of their children having teachers

who were knowledgeable, supportive, and collaborative. Communication between school personnel and parents was key to satisfaction with the schools.

Impact as a Function of Category. Students were transferring across disability categories; however, findings revealed that students with emotional behavior disorders were impacted differently than those in other categories. Parents, students, and school personnel all agreed that students with emotional behavioral disorders benefited from the open enrollment. Parents and students endorsed the importance of a "fresh start" for these students. Parents discussed the need for their children to leave a situation that was not in their best interests or to transfer to a school where a new peer group could be established. They also commented on open enrollment's appeal for children with extensive special education histories.

Data gathered from school personnel interviewed at the eight case study sites supported parents' endorsement of open enrollment for students with emotional behavioral disorders. Teachers and administrators discussed the importance of a new environment or a school that provided more opportunities for social networks for students with emotional behavioral disorders.

School personnel also discussed how students with emotional behavioral disorders were subtly or overtly asked to leave their schools through open enrollment or other school choice options. Findings suggest that school personnel used choice options as a means to move students out of situations that were either detrimental for the students or undesirable to the school personnel. These findings raise concerns about the services available for students with emotional behavioral disorders and how open enrollment might be used to circumvent district responsibilities for these students.

Impact on School Districts. Directors of special education were asked to rate and rank issues relating to open enrollment and the transfer of students with disabilities. The most frequently reported reasons were related to district finances. These responses may reflect the funding mechanism Minnesota uses when students with disabilities transfer. In Minnesota, when a student with a disability transfers through open enrollment, the cost of education that goes

beyond the state and federal foundation aids are billed back to the resident district. These costs referred to as "excess costs" must be paid by the resident district. Until the 1994-1995 school year foundation aids were also billed back to the resident district. Some districts were experiencing difficulty receiving both the foundation aids and the excess costs from the resident districts prompting a change in the law. Now only excess costs are billed back to the resident district with foundation aids being provided directly from the state.

Issues relating to excess costs were of central concern to directors of special education. Data from district case studies provided more concrete information about why directors held these concerns. Directors and superintendents were concerned about payment of excess costs as well as the loss of control experienced by resident districts when students with disabilities transferred. When students with disabilities transfer the individual education program (IEP) is under the control of the chosen district. If the resident district did not send a representative to the IEP meeting to monitor the programs two things could occur: 1) services could be added to the IEP with little regard to their cost, or 2) program decisions could be made by the non-resident district personnel that staff members in the resident district believed were not in the best interest of the student. Both of these were concerns for administrators in the resident districts.

School personnel interviewed were also concerned about transportation issues when students with disabilities transferred through open enrollment. Minnesota's open enrollment law provides for transportation to the district borders by the resident district. From that point, the non-resident district can either provide transportation or parents can take total responsibility for the transportation to the chosen district. Transportation funds are available for low-income families.

There was considerable confusion by district administrators when discussing transportation for students with disabilities who transfer through open enrollment. Some interpreted the transportation provision of the law as being the same for all students; others believed it was the districts' responsibility to transport students with disabilities. As a result of this confusion, there was no uniform transportation practice. Some districts provided

transportation; others did not. However, if transportation needs were written into the IEP, it was then provided; usually by the non-resident district. This issue again raised the concern of administrators in districts that were losing students with disabilities.

It is interesting to note that those districts that were gaining students with disabilities were more often those that held a tight rein on the IEP practices and sent representatives to IEP meetings of students transferring out of the district. Administrators in districts with a net-loss of students with disabilities through open enrollment were less attentive. Several issues arise about whether the concerns voiced by administrators could not be dealt with by instituting good administrative practices. Districts that did not send representatives to the individual education program (IEP) meetings; thereby putting control for all the special education programming in the hands of the non-resident districts, were more apt to have complaints about loss of control issues and the amount of services being provided for which they had to pay.

High School Graduation Incentives (Second Chance Option for At-Risk Youth)

Minnesota's High School Graduation Incentives (HSGI) Program is a school choice option designed to meet the needs of students at-risk of not completing school. Students who are behind two or more years academically, have dropped out of school, been expelled from school, are pregnant or a custodial parent, or are at-risk for other reasons may enroll at any time during the school year in any school in the state. They may also choose to attend any one of the over 140 alternative schools or programs in the state. In Table 1, a description of the various educational opportunities accessible through HSGI.

**Table 1**

**High School Graduation Incentives and Related Options**

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|---|---|
| High School Graduation Incentives Program | Designed for students who are not likely to graduate or who have dropped out of school before getting their diplomas. These learners may choose from a variety of education options to complete the requirements needed to graduate. 1987* |
| Area Learning Centers | Offer personalized education programs, year round, day and evening, to accommodate the needs of learners. A wide variety of courses, leading to diplomas, are taught using alternative methods of instruction. Additional services are provided to assure each learner's success. Learners aged 12 through adult may attend. 1988* |
| Public or Private Alternative Programs | Personalize the education of learners at risk of not completing high school. Classes are taught using alternative methods and flexible scheduling. These programs are offered during the typical school day and year. 1987* |
| Education Programs for Pregnant Minors and Minor Parents | Designed to encourage parenting and pregnant teens to continue their education and receive their high school diplomas. A variety of education options are available. Child care and transportation may be arranged. 1988* |

Source: MN Department of Education. *Date of Implementation

Most students who participate in the HSGI option attend one of the alternative schools or Area Learning Centers. Over 30,000 students were enrolled in one of the alternative programs or Area Learning Centers during the 1993-1994 school year. Nearly all of these students chose to attend these schools with a small percentage being placed in the schools by the courts or school personnel. Many of these students were students who had been served in special education at some point during their schooling. Studies to determine the role HSGI plays in the education of students with disabilities were conducted primarily in these alternative programs. Findings discussed in this paper are from the following sources:

- Tracking Survey: Directors of the state's alternative schools and Area Learning Centers were surveyed during the 1990-1991 school year to determine the participation rates of students with disabilities in these programs (n=63; 69% return rate).

- Directors Survey: Directors of the state's alternative schools and Area Learning Centers were surveyed during the 1993-1994 school year to determine the characteristics of their programs (n=83; 62% return rate).

- Teachers' Survey: A social studies, communications/English, and math/science teacher each at a random sample of alternative schools and Area Learning Centers were surveyed during the 1993-1994 school year to determine the characteristics of the programs (n=82; 59% return rate).

- Student Survey: Students attending the state's alternative programs and Area Learning Centers were surveyed during the 1993-1994 and 1994-1995 school year to determine their reasons for leaving the traditional high school, their reasons for attending an HSGI program, their special education history, and other information about their educational experiences (n=216).

- Student Interviews: A group of students with disabilities enrolled in the HSGI were interviewed to determine their traditional high school and HSGI school experiences. Special emphasis was placed on their special education experiences at each site (n=30)

In the process of gathering information about the participation of students with disabilities in the open enrollment option, it became apparent that students were also participating in HSGI in rather large numbers. This is not surprising given the at-risk criteria set up for participation in the option. However, several questions were raised about the role these options play for students with disabilities. To what extent is participation in the HSGI option a function of disability category? Since these are alternative programs, what type of special education services are provided for these students? What are the characteristics of these programs? What reasons do students give for transferring through HSGI and are these reasons related to special education? All of these questions have implications for school choice policies and for secondary special education policy. With the high number of students with disabilities at-risk of not completing school (Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby; 1992), there is an urgent need to determine policies and practices that might be meeting their educational needs. Examining Minnesota's second chance programs provides necessary information by which to evaluate an existing policy that might have potential for this student

population. The following discussion highlights the major findings from our investigation of HSGI programs and students with disabilities.

Participation. Surveys of directors at the state's alternative schools and Area Learning Centers were conducted during the 1990-1991 school year. Directors reported that 19% of their students had disabilities and that of these students over 50% were students identified as having emotional behavioral disorders (Gorney & Ysseldyke; 1993)). The number of students with disabilities in these programs in considered underrepresented in this survey as several directors and teachers have explained that many students with disabilities exit special education upon enrolling in alternative schools. In addition, many of the schools do not serve students within a traditional special education framework and some students may not be identified who had previously received special services.

Students with learning disabilities (35%) comprised the other large group of participants in these programs who were identified as having a disability. Other disability categories were rarely identified by directors as attending their schools.

Program Characteristics. There was considerable interest in the characteristics of these programs and how they might differ from those at traditional high schools. Directors and a random sample of teachers were surveyed to provide information about the alternative programs. Information about curriculum, educational delivery models, organization and decision making, and special education services were gathered from these respondents.

Though by definition "alternative" often means using a unique educational approach, these schools and programs did have some characteristics that were similar (Lange, 1995)

- Student enrollment was small with most schools having enrollments from 8 to 150 students.
- The majority of directors reported their schools were appropriate for *some* students with disabilities.
- Educational delivery was most often one-to-one instruction.
- Individual learning goals and plans were used by the majority of the programs.

- Decisions relating to curriculum, evaluation, and program delivery were most often made by teachers and the director.
- Decisions relating to funding and space allocation were made by school district central administrators.
- Special education services were more often provided within the classroom using a total inclusion model.
- Most programs had flexible days and hours that were not typical of the traditional high school.

When directors and teachers were asked to generate the three most important issues facing their programs over the next two to three years, the most frequently reported reasons were in the areas of funding, adequate space, and student enrollment growth. When respondents were asked the three most important special education issues facing their programs over the next two to three years the most frequently reported issues were the increase in special education students (especially students identified as having emotional behavioral disorders) and IEP compliance (Lange, 1995).

Student Characteristics and Reasons for Transfer. Students attending a sample of alternative programs and Area Learning Centers were surveyed to determine their reasons for leaving the traditional high school and enrolling in the alternative program. Since it was difficult to get an accurate account of students' special education experiences through the director and teacher surveys, students were asked to provide information about special education. Thirty-eight percent reported they had been served by special education at some time in their years of schooling. Fifty percent of these students had received special education services during their high school years. Students who had been served by special education at some time during their schooling were compared to those who did not report receiving any special education services. For most items surveyed there was not a significant difference between the mean responses for students with disabilities when compared to students without disabilities. Major findings are highlighted below:

- Students with disabilities worked approximately the same number of hours per week (18 hours) as students without disabilities (16 hours).
- The percentage of students with disabilities who report having dropped out of school at least once (57%) is similar to those without disabilities (59%).
- The four most frequently endorsed reasons for continued attendance at the alternative school were the same for both students with and without disabilities: 1) smaller class sizes, 2) staff members help with assignments, 3) desirable scheduling, and 4) the opportunity to work at their own pace.
- There was a significant difference between the reasons given by students with disabilities and those without disabilities for these responses with the students with disabilities endorsing the following reasons more often: less homework, receive credit for a job, and inclusion.
- The most frequently endorsed environmental reason for continued attendance at the alternative program for both students with and without disabilities was because staff treat students as individuals (86%).
- Students with disabilities as compared with students without disabilities more frequently endorsed the following environmental reasons for continued attendance: 1) no suspension/detention at alternative program, 2) not being teased or hassled by other students, 3) being treated equally.
- Students with disabilities reported they would be less likely to be attending a different school if they were not attending the alternative program than students without disabilities.

Program Impact. Directors and teachers in alternative programs were concerned about the increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolling in their programs. Concerns generally fell into two areas: 1) Concern over whether the program or school had the appropriate program for the students with disabilities, 2) Concern that the programs that were designed for all students at-risk would become sites for special education students primarily and not a heterogeneous student population. Many directors and teachers at these sites were grappling with issues relating to special needs students.

## Postsecondary Enrollment Options

One of the other popular school choice options available to Minnesota students is the Postsecondary Enrollment Options Program (PSEO). This option allows eleventh and twelfth

grade students an opportunity to apply to enroll in any of the state's public colleges and universities or private colleges (nearly all private institutions will accept PSEO students). Students may take courses at these institutions for high school and college credit during their junior and senior years at no cost to the student.

While many assume this option is only for those who desire the most rigorous academic program, findings from our study indicate that PSEO participants also include students with special academic needs. Findings from a 1990-1991 survey of 77 directors of PSEO programs at the postsecondary institutions reveal that students with disabilities are accessing postsecondary institutions through this school choice option (return rate---90%). The role PSEO may play for students with disabilities is especially important to consider. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS), *Youth with Disabilities: How Are They Doing?* (SRI International, 1991), tracked a national sample of students with disabilities and found very few were accessing postsecondary programs after high school. "Despite the growth in the importance placed on postsecondary education and on both the opportunities and propensity to acquire it, according to NLTS estimates, enrollment in 2-year or 4-year colleges still was fairly rare among youth with disabilities in their first 2 years after secondary school (p.9-2)." Fairweather and Shaver (1991) note that "a major factor in the transition from high school to adulthood is access to and success in postsecondary education and training, and point out that when students with disabilities are compare to the at-large high school students population they are considerably less likely to enroll in postsecondary institutions (p.264).

These findings suggest that students with disabilities may need an inroad to postsecondary education. Whether an option such as PSEO provides that access is important to consider. Before addressing its possibilities, however, understanding participation of students with disabilities in an existing program is important to examine.

Participation. Directors of PSEO programs at the various postsecondary institutions reported that 6% of their PSEO participants were students with disabilities. Students with learning disabilities comprised the greatest percentage of participants with disability (62%).

Students with emotional behavioral disorders (12%) and mental retardation (9%) were also participants. Most students with disabilities enrolled in a technical college providing vocational coursework (Lange & Ysseldyke, 1993).

Program Impact. Seventy percent of the respondents shared comments about PSEO and the participation of students with disabilities. Most comments addressed the problems of resources for meeting the students needs, knowledge of disabilities, and the difficulties with inadequate transition between the secondary schools and postsecondary institutions.

## School Choice Options and Implications for Students with Disabilities

There are several issues to be addressed for students with disabilities when a reform such as school choice is introduced. One of these issues involves the participation of students with disabilities and their experiences when they participate. Findings from these studies indicate that students with disabilities are participating in three of the most popular and visible school choice options in a state with the most comprehensive legislation in the country. Students with disabilities are accessing these options to various degrees and appear to be a part of these reform measures.

Each of these options is very different from the other, however, and appears to serve a different function for these students. Open enrollment allows students to transfer to any school district for a variety of reasons. These students often choose another school district because of experiences related to their disability. The students transferring are from a variety of disability categories and grade levels. The reasons for transferring their children are many and varied; but, many relate to the specific needs of their child being met in the chosen school district.

Students transferring through HSGI are involved in a different type of school choice option. These students are most often at-risk of not completing school and the second chance option allows them an opportunity to be educated in an environment that provides more one-to-

one instruction that is geared toward meeting the needs of the most disenfranchised from the system. There are proportionately more students with disabilities using this choice option.

The characteristics of the schools and programs in the second chance option (HSGI) that were described by teachers, directors, and students also often define a good special education program. Respondents described programs that provided individual goal setting, individual instruction, emotional counseling, opportunities for social exchange, and a diversity of educational methods.

The responses from the student survey revealed few differences between students who had or had not been served by special education when questioned about their reasons for transfer. However, there were differences in the number of students with disabilities who reported leaving the traditional high school because they were hassled or teased and those that endorsed reasons related to academic rigor. More information is needed to understand the experiences of secondary students with disabilities in both the academic and social areas in relationship to their at-risk status. It might be that these second chance programs are giving students with disabilities a legitimate exit opportunity from high school and are, in fact, serving as the dropout prevention mechanism for which they are designed.

Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) meet yet another need of students with disabilities. Many students with disabilities remain in high schools until they are 21, often in the same academic setting for several years. Transition services are particularly important during these years. PSEO allows students more than just an occasionally foray into the postsecondary world. With this option, students may actually take classes at the postsecondary institution and experience transition with the guidance of their high school teachers. In addition, they join their age peers at the postsecondary institution. More and more high schools in Minnesota are using the PSEO option to provide a transition experience. Often these experiences are actually written into the IEP.

Each of these options is meeting a unique need for students with disabilities. While the discussion of school choice is usually cast in broad and general terms, it is important to examine

specifically how the options and the participating populations differ. In each of these options, students with disabilities are participating with specific needs being addressed by the particular option.

Impact on Schools and Programs

Survey and interview data from school personnel suggest that there are issues for schools, school districts, and programs when students with disabilities transfer through these options. Though students with disabilities are not excluded from these programs, neither were they the target population for these options. Therefore, issues relating to their services must be addressed.

Open Enrollment. When students with disabilities transfer through open enrollment, school districts that do not keep a close eye on transfers, the procedures, and the IEP process may be more greatly impacted. When school districts abdicate control over the education of a student for which the district still has monetary responsibility it is not in the best interest of the school district and may not be in the best interest of the students. The student still resides in their district and care should be taken to ensure a good program that is in the best interests of the student and the school district.

Administrators in school districts that are losing, even a few students with disabilities, should review the reasons parents transfer and determine how the district can improve its program in light of the information. Open enrollment is designed to move the system to evaluate its programs and services in hopes that the result will be an improved system. Addressing the issues of families with students with disabilities who transfer is an important part of the process that may result in better programs and less expense to the district.

Second Chance Options (HSGI). HSGI or second chance programs were designed to meet the needs of students who are at-risk of not completing school. These programs were not designed as special education programs. Yet, large numbers of students who have been served in special education are enrolling in the programs. Though the programs address the needs of many students with disabilities, the intent of the second chance option was to serve all students who are

at-risk of not completing school. Consequently, the design of the programs and the service delivery system are unique and individual to each program. This means some programs provide traditional special education services and others do not. How services should be delivered to students with disabilities within a alternative school or second chance model is an issue to be considered.

Anecdotal and survey results taken from students with disabilities suggest that often times students transfer into these programs to escape the special education label or to begin again in an environment that is more inclusive. Special care must be taken in how these students are served within these programs. If the rules surrounding access to special education service become the focus, the possible positive outcomes of this type of school choice option may be reduced. However, if students special education needs are not being met within these schools, this must also be addressed.

Do we evaluate these programs on a different set of criteria than we do high schools that are required to service students through the IEP process? Do we allow students who actively choose these options to exit from special education and serve them in a totally inclusive setting without delineating their special needs? If we can determine that students with disabilities are succeeding in these programs, what does this mean for the secondary special education programs? With the high number of students with disabilities who are not completing school, we must look closely at what is working. While we know that students with disabilities are accessing the options and the reasons for their decisions, we do not know the outcomes of these decisions. More research is needed to determine whether these programs are making an impact on student outcomes and how this relates to secondary special education policy.

Postsecondary Enrollment Options. PSEO provides an excellent opportunity to bridge the secondary-postsecondary gap for students with disabilities. However, there are issues for secondary schools and postsecondary institutions when students participate in this option. How support services will be delivered when students enroll in postsecondary institutions and who is

ultimately responsible for the student's program must be determined for this option to be successful.

Directors at postsecondary institutions voiced concern over their role in educating students with disabilities who enroll through PSEO. Who is responsible for providing support within the postsecondary system is an issue. Many institutions do not have the support system in place to accommodate large numbers of students with disabilities. Others do not see it as their responsibility to provide support services to high school students who are enrolling through PSEO. Delineating who and how support services will be delivered is crucial to the student's successful experience. Collaboration between the secondary schools and postsecondary schools has been occurring in Minnesota to address these issues and has helped the implementation of the option.

Summary

Three different school choice options and their impact on students with disabilities were examined over the past five years. A rich data base was developed that enables educators, policymakers, and administrators to evaluate the policies and their potential for students with disabilities. While there continues to be considerable debate over the merits of school choice options, the findings from these studies suggest that students with disabilities are positively impacted when they are allowed to choose an educational program through a specific school choice option. Often specific needs of this student population are addressed through transferring to a different school or program.

Minnesota's programs are well conceived, structured programs. These options are being used to benefit students with disabilities in ways that were never considered by the original legislation. Yet, there are issues for the school districts and programs that are implementing the choice options. These must be evaluated and addressed by policymakers.

While the data available from these studies are substantive and informative, they do not address whether the options result in better outcomes for students with disabilities who transfer

through a choice option. This is the needed missing link by which to further judge their effectiveness.

There are many different types of school choice options being considered in states across the country. The impact of school choice options on the educational system is a central issue in examining the policy; but, it is also important to consider the impact on individual students. School choice is a complex and interactive policy (Lange, 1995) and its merits and limitations must be debated with an understanding of that complexity. However, in reviewing the policy, its impact on specific populations must also be considered. It might be that the impact of school choice options is variable depending upon the student population and the type of option available. Most often the potential impact of these options for students with disabilities is never considered. While the school choice debate centers on systemic change, the findings from these studies illustrate the importance of evaluating these programs looking at different purposes. The data from these studies can help policymakers frame the discussion to include the possibilities school choice options have for students with disabilities as they debate its merits and limitations.

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